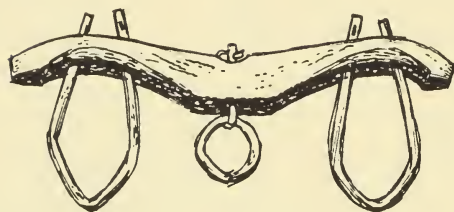


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Abraham Lincoln, a study
in genius.

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

A Study in Genius

By

DR. PRESTON BRADLEY



The

Peoples Church of Chicago

NEW PANTHEON THEATRE

4650 SHERIDAN ROAD

February Eleventh, Nineteen twenty-three

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Dr. Bradley speaks extemporaneously. The addresses are
stenographically reported by Mr. Edwin L. Cobb

ABRAHAM LINCOLN—A STUDY IN GENIUS

I am afraid my address this morning will be interpreted by many of you very much as two Irishmen interpreted a speech which Mr. Bryan made shortly after his return from Europe. Two Irishmen went to hear Mr. Bryan speak. After the address one turned to the other and said: "Well, how did you like it?" He said, "It struck me that Mr. Bryan aint as good as he used to be." The other said, "No, and he never was, either!"

I found this week somewhere between sixteen miles from Alberta in northern Minnesota, 22° below zero, and the lecture room in Lansing, Michigan, Friday evening with over six hundred men, packed so tight you could not breathe—I mean the air—somewhere between Alberta and Lansing I found this hard cold which is the matter with me this morning. And it is not a bit of fun. Last night was the second night since Sunday that I have been in a bed, that is, in a real bed. No one ever called a Pullman berth a bed. I was told to go to bed when I arrived in Chicago yesterday and stay there until I was all right. And if I had to do that I would be there the rest of my life. Folks that have to go to bed until they are all right have to stay there the rest of their lives. At least, I would. So I said, No, I am going to Church this morning; I am going to talk a little while on Abraham Lincoln. I don't suppose I can talk very long, because I really am suffering. But I believe in the Law of Compensation in this world, that no one ought to suffer for doing good and I don't believe any one suffers from doing good, and perhaps a good way for me to get well is for me to go over to the Church and preach. And against the reason of most folks that knew the situation, I said, "I am going," and here I am, and the longer I am here the better I feel. I am not half as much worried as a lot of folks I know. I sort of feel that the things that are not good God doesn't send, and if God doesn't send them they are not vital to us. So get rid of them. And if you have to listen to a sermon to get rid of them, all right; and if you have to preach one, all right; but, whatever you do, get rid of them. I don't know what there is about colds and aches and fevers and sore throats that is causing so much trouble in America just

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now. I don't know what it is, probably because it is popular, and anybody that has not a cold now isn't in it, and I suppose the most of us want to be popular about some things, even that.

There isn't any theme in the world that I know of that is so inspiring to submerge self and all its laws and all its attachments to earth and soar into the heights which are touched by the spirit of God and of Truth like the theme of Abraham Lincoln, because Abraham Lincoln was so tall in the really worth-while things of life that he himself parted the stars, and his outstanding genius was so lofty that one cannot help when they stand upon this plane of earth and cast their eyes star-ward and skyward to see the outstanding beauty and power of his life, and if there ever was a problem which the speaker or the historian or biographer had to overcome, it is the problem of so vitalizing the personality that they are discussing that they shall lose much of that which they have, which the world has brought to them by the theory or by the system of speculation, and they shall become outstanding in their realism and in their sense of humanity.

We have heard so much about the almost spectacular Lincoln; the Lincoln who was almost a great dramatist; the Lincoln who had surrounded himself with so much that was purely the dramaturgie in life; we have heard so much of the Lincoln of Gettysburg; we have heard so much of the Lincoln of the White House; we have heard so much of the Lincoln in Ford's Theater on the tragic night in April, 1865. We have associated with the character and personality of Lincoln something which takes him away from the great humanity in which most of us move and live. We almost forget the human Lincoln, the Lincoln of flesh and blood, the Lincoln who had his problems and heart-aches, the Lincoln who had his tears and his sorrows, the Lincoln who was intensely human and through a rarefication of the impulses of that humanity was able to achieve in the estimation of the world of genius that is rarely achieved since the foundation of time. For I maintain that there is nothing supernatural about the life and personality of Abraham Lincoln in the sense of his genius being of an extraneous origin. I think on the part of the world there is altogether too much stress and too much shallowness in the thought that great men are born; that the genius is born; the great outstanding genius is the product of some great background of evolution. Obviously, there is a certain element of truth in this philosophy, for we are utterly unable to account for some of the great personalities of human history through any law of heredity or environment.

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It is quite true that there is some great development in life that attaches itself to some personalities that defies all the laws upon which men usually build the thing that we call genius. But if I have correctly studied the life and times of Abraham Lincoln, as I have tried to do since early youth, I cannot detect that there is about Abraham Lincoln anything that will add to the theory of the biologist or anthropologist or psychologist or psychoanalyst or Freudianist, in their philosophy of what constitutes genius.

There are so many of us who think that genius just happens, and then with the happening of that genius we run into all sorts of excursions, into the realm of insanity and into the realm of various influences of the emotional life, into its reactions upon the man of genius. And immediately we have a school that says no man can be a genius without an element of insanity involved in it, and there is always the serious element to associate with genius something of an abnormal development, where you have extensive development on one plane there is something exceedingly defective somewhere else. And it is true, if we analyze the capacity of the great and outstanding men of genius, due to the fact that he does possess in some particular emphasis some great outstanding power or creativeness there may be in the symmetry of his life a slight disturbance so there is not an exactly normal relationship existing throughout his entire life. But to the extent to which some of our Freudians and psychologists go, it seems to me, is utterly ridiculous. For when we come to the character of Abraham Lincoln no man can deny his genius. You can go over his life with the finest of analytical power, and when you are all through, carefully investigating and carefully building your deductions from your investigations of his career and his life—there he stands, that unimpeachable outstanding genius; although be it a human being, a man who could tell stories that had more latitude than longitude, a man that gave every evidence of understanding the heart-throb of the world, and, yet, a man that had achieved and developed to the rank of genius of the first-water type; not a genius whose personal life was seared by immoralities, such as some of the genius of literature and art; not a genius who rose over the crushed and broken bodies of bleeding men and women and little children, like Napoleon of France; not a genius who could stand upon the borderland of the Unknowable in the world of theological and psychological interpretations and become the medium through which some great fundamental principle of philosophy or of immortality

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should be born, for Lincoln had very little to say about either ; but, a genius who possessed the fine symmetry of normality. For it is not necessary for genius to be insane, nor is it necessary for genius to give evidence of the immoralities of the human plane.

And so when we come to this character of Abraham Lincoln we are face to face with an entirely new conception and interpretation of the law of genius. It is quite true that we cannot explain Lincoln by his nativity, and yet those who intimate that Lincoln's blood was not pure blood are those who are not informed with the life of Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln's father was of a very fine family of very high order. The Lincolns that came out of the East into Kentucky were poor, but there were branches of their family in the East that were people of superior quality. The father of Abraham Lincoln was a poor man, with all the poverty of those years; and to be poor those years meant a great deal more than to be poor at this time. But Abraham Lincoln's blood was good blood and it was pure blood. And that genius of motherhood which his mother possessed, his own mother who left him so early in life, and then the fortunate circumstance of being blessed with a foster-mother who loved him like his own mother, Nancy Hanks, who carried the father of Abraham Lincoln when Lincoln was still a boy. But don't underestimate and don't fall heir to that error or that untruth which permeates so much of the more or less hazy atmosphere about Lincoln that his birth is shrouded in mystery. The parenthood of Abraham Lincoln is not in doubt. I hear many people who cast almost an intimate slur upon the fact that Abraham Lincoln was a nameless baby. The parenthood of Lincoln is established beyond all question of doubt.

We have in the People's Church a woman who is very closely related to the Reverend Thomas Head, who was the clergyman that officiated at the wedding of Lincoln's father and mother, and the Reverend William E. Barton, who is an authority on Lincoln in America, has recently given new light to the world on these early and obscure years of Lincoln.

Now, my Freudian friend and my psychoanalyst, and you who are always trying to link up something of a physical or animal nature with the transcendental beauty of immortal genius, let me call your attention to the fact that you cannot explain Lincoln by any of your theories of insanity or of sexuality. Abraham Lincoln was the son of a man and a woman who were married and who loved, and Abraham Lincoln's name is a name that is unsullied by any of that

sort of thing. You cannot explain the genius of Lincoln through his nativity. His family did not distinguish itself in the way that we expect or might expect families would distinguish themselves, but neither has the son of Abraham Lincoln. He has a son living today in the United States, who was a resident of the city of Chicago for a great many years. Abraham Lincoln's son, Robert T. Lincoln, was a man who developed great business ability and was somewhat of a financial wizard, associated for many years with the Pullman Company of America. But Robert T. Lincoln has never given one scintilla of evidence in his entire life that he partakes of one single quality of the genius of his father.

Don't explain or attempt to explain everything by this law of heredity.

Ralph Wado Emerson, the most gigantic intellect that the transcendental school of the East ever had, had a son who was an idiot. I could go on and name you hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of men who have distinguished themselves—not to the rank of genius, I will admit, but who have distinguished themselves, that you cannot account for through the mere law of heredity. Of course, it is a sensible child that picks out a great grand-father. We must all admit that. But, nevertheless, we cannot explain genius by the mere law of heredity.

Now let us look at Abraham Lincoln just a moment and see if we cannot discover in his own persistency and in his own ambition something of the key that will open up to us an understanding of Lincoln. Altogether Abraham Lincoln went to school less than twelve months. Now, think of that! The first four or five of those months were spent in a "blab" school.

Now I know by the way you receive that that very few of you know what a "blab" school is. If there is anyone here from southern Indiana or some parts of Kentucky they will know what a "blab" school is. It is a school where the students all study out loud in order to convince the teacher that they are studying. And Abraham Lincoln's early schooling was spent in a "blab" school. There these pupils sat and studied out loud. How far we have gone in education in the lifetime of one man!

Well, altogether, Abraham Lincoln had only twelve months of schooling, as we speak of going to school.

The first evidence of the latent genius of Abraham Lincoln in the world of the intellectual in which he later expressed his superiority was to be found in the fact that Abraham

Lincoln had such a tendency toward a complete understanding that he permitted no obscurity to take precedence. Lincoln tells us that the only thing in his life that really made him mad was to have people talk about things in his presence as a boy and young man that he did not understand, and he tells us that when his father would have some of the neighbors in and they would sit around the fireside in the evening and discuss some of the growing questions of politics in connection with the frontier and they used words that Abraham Lincoln did not know, that he would stay up after they had gone and would not retire or close his eyes until he had mastered those words and those ideas. It was the predisposition in the mind of Lincoln to master that which he did not understand with a clarity that needed no explanation that was the foundation of Abraham Lincoln's intellectual superiority. It was not that his brain was any different than anybody else's in its physical make-up or its physical inheritance, but he had an inherent predisposition and tendency to master that which was presented to him before he gave up the idea. He would turn ideas over in his mind, and as he once said, he would keep an idea in his mind until he had bounded it on the east and bounded it on the west and bounded it on the north and south.

Now that was the latent thing in the intellectual life of Abraham Lincoln that is so outstanding in its truthfulness to the one that is trying to analyze the genius of Lincoln.

Now we are often told that Lincoln was a great reader. There are those who knew him late in his lifetime who said that that might have been true in early years, but it was not true in his later years. Lincoln's library consisted of "Pilgrim's Progress"—I am speaking of him as a young man—"Life of Washington," "Constitutional History of Indiana," a copy of the Constitution of the United States, the "Declaration of Independence," and the Bible. Shakespeare was lacking, and due to the fact that Lincoln quoted very little in any of his speeches of any literature (Lincoln quoted probably at little as any one that has ever been in American public life), we are led to believe that he did not have a working familiarity with the great classics of literature. He knew little of Shakespeare; he knew nothing of Greek; he knew nothing of Latin. He knew nothing of any tongue other than the tongue of his nativity. But his quality of mind due to a moral rectitude—there is no character in the history of the world that gives as plainly as Abraham Lincoln does the power for illustration, of the effect of the mind over the body

and the career of a man. Abraham Lincoln's background was his unimpeachable integrity of mind, a mind that he had made so exact and so analytical and yet had retained all of the finer qualities of a beautiful human touch; a mind that controlled his destiny and outlined his life and gave him in his darkest and deepest hours a fortification such as few men in this world have ever achieved.

Now to the character of Lincoln. To the youth, which is my primary concern this morning. In some of these side-lights of the genius of Lincoln there is everything to make one feel that if any one in the world ought to have given up it was Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln's whole life, from the time he was born until 1860, was largely a life of repeated disappointments and failures. The first thing that happened was a business failure. Most men never recover from that. But Abraham Lincoln was in business and the firm of Lincoln and his business associates simply went into bankruptcy and Lincoln took over the debts of that firm, and for the first early years of his young manhood, for he moved to Springfield to practice law, Abraham Lincoln was paying the debts of the bankrupt firm. That was the first experience that he had in his life—failure.

The sweetheart of his youth; the only woman that Abraham Lincoln ever loved, was taken away from him in that tragic death of his sweetheart. And where you find a rugged virile heart, touched by the dew of the out-of-door, with muscles trained by the splintering of oak rails, when a heart like that loves, it loves deeply. Those pioneers in their loves did not gamble with love. They were not butterflies by day and moths by night. Human affections were not things to play with in their days. What a different moral condition we would have in America today if that still held. The sacredness of love was not a coat to put on and take off with Abraham Lincoln. And he loved her and Death took her, and his life was never the same after that.

There were two things: Bankruptcy and the death of his sweetheart. But that was not all.

The first time he ever ran for the legislature of the State of Illinois he was hopelessly defeated and they thought he was snowed under for life. That is not all. He went to that legislature four times and was defeated again. Was elected to the Congress of the United States, only served one term, was defeated again; a candidate for the United States Senate and defeated again by a young man thirty-five years old, Stephen A. Douglas. Defeated again. Married a woman that

did not understand him; that probably loved him, but who was never a part of his life in that sweet beauty of companionship that makes marriage such a happy and beautiful experience. Mary Todd was only the wife of the President Abraham Lincoln; she was not the sweetheart of the man Abraham Lincoln. But that is not all. After a marriage that never brought him what a marriage brings when the marriage is right, Abraham Lincoln, when the Whigs were successful and he wanted a position in the land office and was turned down, he went to Philadelphia in 1856 to try an important law suit in which he was associated with Edwin M. Stanton wherein the client was Mr. Robert Emerson. Mr. Stanton in 1856 refused to let Abraham Lincoln make a plea in the courtroom of Philadelphia, because he thought he would reflect discredit upon his cause and upon his client and told him so, and in 1856, four years before 1860—think of that, four years before 1860, three years before Lincoln made the speech in Cooper Union in 1859 in New York. Think of it! Lincoln was given a complimentary vote for Vice-President of the United States in a national convention, and the delegates, after the complimentary vote for Vice-President had been given to Lincoln, arose and asked who Lincoln was! In 1856! Lincoln had been in Springfield as a lawyer, and Lincoln was well known at the bar, but he had not gone out beyond the confines of the State of Illinois, then it was that Lincoln in 1859 made that Cooper Union speech. And for the first time Abraham Lincoln was a national figure.

And I can see him sitting there upon the platform at Cooper Union with that throng in front of him, and I can hear the chairman of that meeting apologize for him; I can hear the little innuendoes and reflections. Then I can see him get up, and I see him unwind those long legs, six feet of solid manhood, and walk out to the edge of that platform, and there—almost the use of monosyllables, words of one syllable, the simplicity of greatness! There stood Lincoln, home-spun, rough hewn! Failed at law, failed in business, failed in office, failed in marriage, failed in scholarship, failed in what the world called eloquence. There stood Abraham Lincoln.

And the world clung to his words, and a few months later the Republican party nominated him for the presidency.

Explain it to me!

Why, there is only one explanation, and Abraham Lincoln gave it himself.

After the Madison Square speech, Abraham Lincoln went up into Vermont, and he met a minister, and this minister

asked him to explain to him why it was that he had such power of expression and could so definitely analyze his feelings and had such a happy way of giving his ideas, and Abraham Lincoln said: "I will tell you why. I had a law suit down in Philadelphia and they would not let me speak. It did not make me mad; it made me sad! And I realized that these Eastern lawyers were college graduates, and I realized that they were coming further West all the time, and I realized that if I ever did what I wanted to do in this world I would have to be able to cope with them intellectually. So at the age of forty I started to study Euclid and at the age of fifty I really started to study law."

Those are the words of Abraham Lincoln; at the age of forty he started to study Euclid. Now, you High School students know what Euclid is. It is geometry. Right away I can hear some of them say: "Well, if you have to do that to be President of the United States you can count me out." Because there are not many youngsters that like geometry.

But Abraham Lincoln knew that to think clearly and to think fundamentally you must have a trained mind.

So Abraham Lincoln mastered the first six books of Euclid, which are the first books of Plain Geometry. And there was not a single problem in the first six books of Euclid that Abraham Lincoln could not state and could not solve. And he himself said: "Don't think that I am any different than anybody else. The only difference between me and other folks is that I improved my opportunities."

And yet we seem to think that all genius is born. We seem to feel that we never do things because we are not an Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln could have died unhonored and unsung if he had permitted the experiences of his life to floor him at the bottom. Abraham Lincoln could have failed, and he had more reasons to quit than most men, but Abraham Lincoln said, No! A trained mind! And he mastered Euclid!

Is it any wonder that he could stand at Gettysburg and in two minutes and a half make a speech that, as we have been told by authorities, will live as long as the language of Shakespeare is spoken?

Why, there was not any veneer about Lincoln. Lincoln so partook of the out-of-doors—and there is no veneer out there. Lincoln had the breeding of sincerity, and the first mark of all genius is sincerity; the first mark of all greatness is sincerity. And Lincoln, when he met Judge Douglas in those debates throughout Illinois, Judge Douglas himself

said: "I have the most formidable foe in debate that America has ever seen. He is harder than Webster; he is deeper than Calhoun; he is more fundamental than Clay; and he is more human than Horace Greeley."

When Judge Douglas met him throughout the state of Illinois in those series of debates, what was the Lincoln that won? It was the Lincoln of simplicity. Lincoln did not know much about tariff; Lincoln was not a scientific economist; Lincoln did not know very much about international diplomacy; he never pretended to. But there was one thing that Lincoln never forgot. He never in all his life forgot that there was a moral aspect to the problems of government, and the outstanding contribution of Lincoln to the world is there; the moral rectitude of his mind and the fact that there was a moral aspect to human government made Lincoln what he was.

And in those days when his heart was bowed in grief, and those years that were dark and foreboding and nobody knew just what would happen, and those days when the North was not satisfied and the South apparently triumphant; those days that some of you can remember. I can't, of course, but some of you can. Those days when the air was vibrant with uncertainty. This great soul, peaceful foe, would take little Willie of the White House, his only comfort, and stroll down the banks of the Potomac, and when the old moon was twinkling its melody from out its sky and all the stars were glistening with the beauty of the night, and there would be the voices of the open places. Abraham Lincoln's virgin soul, Abraham Lincoln's universal soul—for the last test of all genius is its universality. Originality is not the test of genius; universality is the test of genius. Shakespeare does not belong to England; he belongs to the world. Socrates is not Grecian; he is the world's. Homer, Shakespeare, and Dante, Milton and all the rest are not the properties of a race or creed or country; they belong to humanity. And Abraham Lincoln was humanity's friend before he was anything else, and it was that friendship of humanity that made him loved like he is today.

We envy the scholar; we are interested in the scientist and the artist, but we all of us love the Brother, and Abraham Lincoln was the Brother.

And I like to take that gentle spirit this morning out of its past, somewhere; I would just like to feel that if those silent lips could once more penetrate the quietness of the tomb, and if that great heart could beat just once more, this

towering giant born and bred of the open, whose brain was always clear because he had schooled himself to think consecutively and scholarly and analytically, who always kept a moral background, that in spite of its heartaches and sadness and sorrow, kept his grip; who laughed sometimes when his own heart was breaking—and that is the hardest laughter in the world; who told a story sometimes to make folks laugh and to establish a point, when darts were pricking at the sensitive places of his own soul.

Oh, these days, so much veneer; these days, when men get a blow and don't recover; in these days, when so many of our American youth want to take the line of least resistance; in these days when there are so many people that think all you have to do is to go out and let the world give you a living by your wits; in these days when we need to emphasize the dignity of Labor; in these days, if we could just have a little more of the sweetness and the fire of this immortal Lincoln!

Oh, great spirit of Lincoln! There were times when you stood alone, and because you stood alone you were all the stronger in the afterlight.

They knocked you and they fought you, and Horace Greeley and Thomas Nash lied about you and maligned you. Stanton said you were wrong, but you said: "Be sure you are right and then go ahead."

And when you came out of that Indiana home and away from Kentucky and Indiana and from that Indiana home into Illinois you blazed a trail, and so you blazed trails in our hearts, and there is a trail that you blazed that no one else must follow. It is all yours. As long as America lives, as long as the nation stands, men will look to you, great Lincoln, with your unimpeachable honesty, your finely developed intellectual life and your great heart.

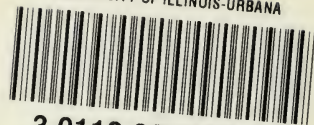
Oh, Lincoln, may your spirit come back to us.

"The coward never started. The weak died on the way. Only the strong man arrives," and that strength must come from mental and spiritual sovereignty.

The finest thing Abraham Lincoln ever said was this:

"I want it said of me after I am gone, that I always plucked a thistle and planted a flower where I thought a flower would grow."

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